Leveraging the Digital Equity Act To Advance Digital Skills

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A Guide for Business Leaders to Partner with State Policymakers

Nearly [one-third of workers in the United States lack digital skills](#), and more than 38% of those workers are required to use moderate or advanced computer skills on the job.[i] This skills gap creates talent and growth issues for businesses of all sizes – from large companies looking to grow and invest in the United States, to small and mid-size companies that employ the greatest share of workers with low or no digital skills.[1]

To address this gap and expand access to economic opportunity, the [Digital Equity Act](#) (DEA), a provision of the [Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act](#), will deploy $2.75 billion in grants to states. Over five years, states will apply these resources to advance foundational digital literacy[2] and industry-specific digital skills, promote digital equity,[3] and help workers and businesses adapt to the rapidly changing digital economy.

As state policymakers prepare plans to bridge the digital divide, employers can help them better understand the digital skills gap and collaborate on solutions to address those disparities – all while promoting digital equity and high-quality jobs. Employer input will be critical to ensure that communities can fully capitalize on these monumental investments to build a digitally resilient and high-quality workforce.

This guide, developed in partnership between [UpSkill America](#) at the Aspen Institute and the [National Governors Association Center for Best Practices](#) (NGA Center), is a product of the NGA Workforce Innovation Network and offers three key strategies and accompanying guiding questions for employers to contribute to DEA planning and implementation:

1. Study Your Skill Needs
2. Tell Your Story
3. Sustain Your Engagement

In addition, text boxes throughout this brief highlight strategies for state policymakers to support and collaborate with employers in exploring these key questions. These best practices are drawn from the delivery of technical assistance to state workforce development leaders, including those that participate in the [National Association of State Workforce Board Chairs](#) and the [National Association of State Liaisons for Workforce Development Partnerships](#), two affiliate networks supported by the NGA Center's [Workforce Development & Economic Policy Program](#).

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[1] UNESCO defines digital skills as "range of abilities to use digital devices, communication applications, and networks to access and manage information. They enable people to create and share digital content, communicate and collaborate, and solve problems for effective and creative self-fulfillment in life, learning, work, and social activities at large."

[2] The Digital Equity Act defines digital literacy as "the skills associated with using technology to enable users to find, evaluate, organize, create, and communicate information."

[3] The Digital Equity Act defines digital equity as "the condition in which individuals and communities have the information technology capacity that is needed for full participation in the society and economy of the United States."

Study Your Skill Needs

Define your company's digital skills needs by considering these questions:

- What are your company's digital skill needs today and in the future? What digital skills do your employees, suppliers, and customers need?

- What is the gap between your digital skills needs and your employees' current abilities? How are you assessing digital skills?

- Who is facing the largest gap in digital skills and what are their barriers to developing those skills?

- What are the most effective strategies for advancing your employees' digital skills? What education and training programs are your employees accessing and what are the results? If applicable, how does this compare to your investments, partnerships, and hiring experiences in other countries?

- What programs is your company engaged with in your community? Who are you partnering with?

- What makes these partnerships successful, or makes one partnership more effective than another? How might states support or scale them?

- What could your state do with federal digital equity investments that would most benefit your company and your employees? What impact would that have on workers with the greatest digital skills gaps, as well as job creation, increased wages, career advancement, tax revenue, reduced human services costs, etc. for your company and employees?

State policymakers can support and collaborate with employers in studying their skill needs by:

- Setting clear definitions, objectives, and goals for digital equity, digital skills and skill attainment, and job quality. See this blog on defining digital skills.

- Asking employers for their feedback on these definitions, objectives, and goals to determine if they are attainable or adequately ambitious

- Developing a data collection and engagement methodology to gather quantitative and qualitative input directly from employers. See this resource on using data for digital skills.

- Leveraging existing groups or forums for engaging business leaders, such as state and local workforce boards or industry councils

- Considering establishing a dedicated task force, commission, or less formal work group to engage relevant state agencies and private sector partners to study digital skills needs statewide and develop policy and program recommendations

Tell Your Story

Communicate your company's digital skills needs and partner to develop and scale solutions:

- Tell your digital skills story to your governor's office, state and federal legislators, state agency leadership, state and local workforce boards, chambers of commerce, industry councils, higher education and career technical education (CTE) institutions, and more.

- In telling your digital skills story, help educate policymakers, educators, and others who may not be as familiar with certain technologies or digital skills and how they are applied in your industry and the high-quality jobs that require those skills.

- Connect your company's digital skills story to your state's vision for economic growth and digital equity, and broader objectives for economic security, national security, and participation in civil society.

- Partner with other employers in your region and/or sector by providing digital skills guidance to state or local workforce boards or joining a sector partnership with businesses in your industry and education and training providers to inform programs and public policy.

- Participate in new digital skills programs by providing input on program design, offering high-quality work-based learning opportunities at your company, and hiring graduates of relevant education and training programs.

- Demonstrate how improved broadband connectivity will enable you to connect more current or potential employees with online training, rethink workplace design and the geographic distribution of your workforce, and increase your ability to attract and retain talent interested in remote or hybrid work.

State policymakers can support and collaborate with employers in telling (and hearing) their story by:

- Executing your engagement strategy for priority industries (surveys, focus groups, advisory groups, etc.)

- Using employer feedback and data to quantify digital skills gaps and barriers to digital literacy

- Leveraging the governor's office to highlight employers' needs and stories and coordinate interagency efforts and employer partnerships to close digital skills gaps

- Partnering with employers to design and fund new pilots for digital literacy and skills training, new platforms for training delivery, and other solutions to meet local skills needs

Business Leaders: Keep these key objectives of the DEA in mind as you study your needs and prepare to tell your story

State digital equity plans must explain:

- The barriers to digital equity experienced by covered populations (see below)
- The state's digital inclusion strategies and activities and how they will be documented and promoted
- How the digital equity plan will impact and interact with other state plans on workforce development, economic development, education, and more
- How states will collaborate with key stakeholders

Target (or "covered") populations to be served by DEA funding include:

- Households earning less than 1.5 times the poverty level
- Members of a racial or ethnic minority group
- Rural residents

- People with language barriers
- Aging individuals
- People with disabilities
- Incarcerated individuals
- Veterans

An additional $1.25 billion in Digital Equity Competitive Grants will be awarded over five years to states and organizations for five eligible activities:

- Digital inclusion activities for covered populations
- Adoption of broadband to provide educational and employment opportunities to covered populations
- Digital skills training programs from foundational digital literacy to advanced occupational skills
- Providing access to devices and equipment
- Improving public access computing centers

More information about DEA objectives and the planning process:

- National Digital Inclusion Alliance - Digital Equity Act Brief
- National Skills Coalition - Boosting Digital Literacy in the Workplace
- World Education - Putting Digital Literacy and Digital Resilience into Frame

Additional resources on advancing digital skills available on page 6.

Sustain Your Engagement

Commit to ongoing partnership in your community:

- Send a leader in your company to serve on a DEA advisory group.

- Connect regularly with policymakers about how your company can support the implementation of your state's DEA plan and other digital skills development efforts.

- Host convenings of policymakers and other employers to discuss progress toward digital skills attainment goals and opportunities for continued public-private partnership.

- Provide state policymakers and educators with feedback on your company's evolving digital skills needs.

- Engage in ongoing efforts to improve job quality to attract and retain employees with in-demand digital skills.

- Share your digital skills success stories and the results of your public-private partnerships with other companies and policymakers.

State policymakers can help sustain employer engagement and partnership by:

- Designing feedback loops with employers and using employer feedback and data to inform training goals and strategies

- Applying employers' upskilling methodologies to state strategies to increase digital literacy and skill development

- Inviting employers to engage in an ongoing conversation about evolving technology and digital skills needs, equity, and job quality, through task force, commission, or work group (see "Studying Your Skills Needs")

- Leveraging employer success stories to elevate successful partnerships and recruit and retain businesses in your state

- Identifying and braiding existing funding for digital literacy and skills training and engaging employers as advocates and co-designers of long-term funding mechanisms for successfully piloted strategies and programs

- Considering digital skills-focused business incentives such as tax credits or short-term wage subsidies for employers that invest in upskilling incumbent workers or reskilling new and potential employees from target populations

- Appointing individuals with knowledge and experience with digital literacy and skills development to serve on state and local workforce boards, CTE advisory committees, etc.

Additional Resources

- Employer Network Advancing Digital Skills and Equity: Digital US Employer Roadmap for Advancing Digital Skills & Equity

- National Skills Coalition: Digital Skills Gaps for Workers Across Industries

- National Telecommunications and Information Administration: Planning a Stakeholder Engagement Strategy and Setting Up Initial Stakeholder Engagement

- NGA Workforce Innovation Network: Using Data To Advance Digital Skills: A State Playbook

- UpSkill America and the Aspen Institute Latinos & Society Program: 10 Things We Learned About Digital Skills During the Pandemic

- UpSkill America at the Aspen Institute: Digital Skills Discussion Guide

- World Education: Putting Digital Literacy and Digital Resilience into Frame

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UpSkill America is an employer-led movement to expand opportunity for America's workers and allow our economy and communities to thrive. The movement promotes training and advancement practices to help frontline and entry-level workers progress in their careers and move into better-paying jobs. UpSkill America is an initiative of the Economic Opportunities Program at the Aspen Institute.

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